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WIT AND HUMOR IN XENOPHON¹

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In the *Euthydemus* Plato introduces a young man from Paeania, Ctesippus by name, a very fine fellow except for his boisterousness, which Socrates says is due to his youth (273A), and which is manifested by loud bursts of laughter (300D). This fondness for hearty laughter was shared by Xenophon, another young Athenian καλὸς κάγαθὸς of the same period, who never grew old in this respect if one is to judge by his writings. His *Symposium* is hardly more than a collection of pleasantries, and the *Anabasis* and the *Cyropaedia*, the most characteristic of his works, contain scores, if not hundreds, of witty or humorous passages. The verb γελῶ is of frequent occurrence on his pages, and he uses more different compounds of this verb than any other prose writer of the classic period.

Humor is, of course, a prominent element in the literature as well as in the life of the ancient Greeks. In poetry there is a parallel development of humorous and serious works. Thus we have the mock-heroic epic, the comedy, and the satyr play. Serious writers, too, are not averse to a bit of fun. The ending of the first book of the *Iliad* and much of the ninth book of the *Odyssey* are composed in a humorous vein. In fact, the temper of the Ionic mind, as one sees in Ionic vase-painting, was gay and sportive. It was Iambe, a woman of Ionic stock, who first made Demeter laugh and forget her sorrow, and Herodotus, the first great Ionic prose writer, delights to tell the amusing stories of Alcmaeon and of his descendant's rival Hippoclides, who "danced his bride away," and of Rhampsinitus and the robber who was too shrewd for him. Tragedy, too, does not refrain from humor: there are elements

¹ Years ago a friend, Principal J. Harold Fuller, of Hardwick, Vermont, remarked that his pupils in the high school found the *Anabasis* amusing. The writer has found much illumination in this remark. In gratitude he is endeavoring in this paper to "pass on the light."

of the comic in the guard of the *Antigone*, the Phrygian slave of the *Orestes*, and in Thoas and Theoclymenus. The writings of Plato are full of a gentle humor; in fact, humor underlies most of the Socratic irony.

In his use of humor Xenophon differs from the other writers of his time, and from Plato most of all. The latter, in this respect, is well described by Xenophon's own characterization of Agesilaus: "It was his charm of manner, and not his jests, that pleased" (*Ages.* xi. 11: *καὶ τὸ εὐχαρι οὐ σκῶμμασιν ἀλλὰ τρόπῳ ἐπεγέδευε*). The *σκῶμμα* or jest was foreign to Plato's nature. This is not to be wondered at if we are to believe with Heraclides (*Diogenes Laertius*, iii. 26) that as a young man Plato never indulged in immoderate laughter. Xenophon, on the contrary, believes in the jest. The *Symposium* is punctuated with laughter. In the *Cyropaedia* (ii. 2. 12) Xenophon makes Cyrus defend men who joke, calling them witty and pleasing (*ἀστεῖοι καὶ εὐχάριτες*), and he remarks at the beginning of the *Symposium* that what men say "in lighter vein" is worth recording. Likewise in the *Hellenica* (ii. 3. 56), after quoting the words of Theramenes, who, just before his death, threw the last drops of the hemlock from the cup as in the game of cottabus and said, "That's for my beauty Critias," Xenophon apologizes for introducing this trifling remark and adds: "But it is an admirable trait to be able to jest in the face of death."

Xenophon differs from the other classic authors also in showing a certain lack of skill in introducing his witticisms. This was due to a fundamental deficiency in the man. As a soldier he was a thorough believer in the cavalry; he was a knight and a lover of the horse. But as a man of letters he never tried to mount Pegasus. He was no poet, and the poets, with the exception of Homer, had little or no influence upon him. Hence his writings lack to a considerable extent that essentially Greek element which poetry above all possesses, the impress of form—what Brunn has called the architectural element of all Greek art, whether literary or plastic. Professor Mahaffy calls Xenophon the precursor of Hellenism. Certainly he is nearer in spirit to the Hellenistic than to the classic Greek age in breaking away from the *genre trenché*—to use a phrase of Napoleon's with which Professor Irving Babbitt in his *New*

Laocoön has made us familiar. This results in a looseness of structure which is seen in all his works. Consequently much of his wit and humor are, as it were, dragged in. It is as if we saw the γελωτοποιός, the jester, summoned when the author needed him. In other words, Xenophon too often tells the joke rather because he thinks it worth telling than because the circumstances demand it. This is seen in many parts of the *Cyropaedia* and especially in the thirteenth chapter of the third book of the *Memorabilia*, which consists of nothing more than a series of witty retorts of Socrates.

This chapter also throws light on the source of much of Xenophon's wit and humor, and accounts as well for certain striking characteristics of the first part of the *Anabasis* which have made the march to Cunaxa "pedestrian" in more than one sense. Why does Xenophon tell us the depth and breadth of rivers and ditches, the number of boats in a pontoon bridge, and so many other uninteresting details? It may be charitable to think that he hoped that they might be of use to some future Greek general, but the truth seems to be rather that Xenophon was an industrious gatherer of facts of this kind, and other data—another Hellenistic tendency—among which were the humorous story and the witty remark.

Aside from their humor these *bons mots* interested Xenophon because of another Hellenistic trait in his character as a writer, his greater nearness to reality. This results in a preference for the individual rather than the universal, and partly accounts for the biographical element in his works—its first appearance in Greek literature—of which excellent examples are found in the *Anabasis*. Xenophon's humor is seen not infrequently in a brief characterization of a man's peculiarities. For example (*Hell.* iv. 3. 2), Agesilaus asked Dercylidas if he would carry the news of the Spartan victory to the cities which had helped to furnish his army, and the latter was pleased with the suggestion, *καὶ γὰρ ἀεὶ φιλαπόδημος ἦν*, "he had a passion for traveling."

This fondness of Xenophon for noting the foibles of the individual may be seen more clearly if one compares some of the speakers in the *Hellenica* with those of Thucydides. The latter generally selects as spokesmen either unnamed representatives of

a city, or leading men who are introduced either without description or else with a few words to show why they were chosen to speak. But Xenophon likes to bring forward a minor character with a brief characterization of some humorous trait. For example (*Hell.* ii. 4. 20), Cleocritus, a man "with a magnificent voice" ($\mu\acute{a}\lambda'$ $\epsilon\nu\phi\nu\omega\sigma$ $\dot{\omega}\nu$), makes a speech in which sound is as noticeable as sense; and (*Hell.* vi. 3. 3) Callias, "who was quite as fond of praising himself as of being praised by others," continually uses the first personal pronoun and refers at some length to the greatness of his own family. Furthermore, if Thucydides were representing the character of the speaker by his words, and not using him merely as a medium for presenting ideas that were essential to his history, he would have allowed the reader to find this out for himself from the words which he put into his mouth. In a similar way Plato lets us do our own laughing at the drunken Alcibiades. Xenophon, on the contrary, frequently tells us when to laugh by saying: "Then everybody laughed." The reason for this seems to lie, not entirely in his unwillingness or inability to be dramatic, but, at least in part, in a characteristic of his writings which Professor Wilamowitz points out in his history of Greek literature where he says that Xenophon probably wrote for a wider circle of readers than did the other Socratics. He wrote for the popular ear, just as Euripides in his use of plain language, among other things, had popularized tragedy. This may explain to some extent why Xenophon wrote with a simplicity that makes the *Anabasis* best of texts for the beginner; it may also be one reason why he introduced so much that is humorous.

Let us now consider the form which Xenophon's humor takes. In the first place, he no more disdains the play upon words than do most Greek authors from Homer down, although he is by no means the word-master that, for example, Plato is. Sometimes this is hardly more than rhetorical paronomasia with occasionally a witty or humorous touch, e.g., *Anab.* i. 4. 8, $\acute{\alpha}\pi\acute{o}\lambda\acute{e}\lambda\acute{o}\acute{\iota}\pi\alpha\sigma\iota\omega$ $\acute{\alpha}\pi\acute{o}\delta\acute{e}\delta\acute{r}\acute{a}\kappa\alpha\sigma\iota\omega$ $\acute{\alpha}\pi\acute{o}\pi\acute{e}\phi\acute{e}\nu\gamma\alpha\sigma\iota\omega$; *iii.* i. 23, $\psi\acute{u}\chi\eta$ $\psi\acute{u}\chi\acute{a}\sigma$; *Cyr.* v. i. 28, $\delta\acute{a}\mu\omega\sigma$ $\epsilon\nu\delta\acute{a}\mu\omega\sigma\alpha\sigma$; *Mem.* i. i. 9, $\delta\acute{a}\mu\omega\acute{\iota}\nu\omega\sigma$ $\delta\acute{a}\mu\omega\acute{\iota}\nu\omega\sigma\alpha\sigma$; *Symp.* vi. 9, $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\kappa\alpha\zeta\epsilon$ $\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\iota}\kappa\kappa\zeta\sigma$; again, at least once it is etymological (*Symp.* viii. 30, $\Gamma\acute{a}\nu\mu\acute{\iota}\delta\sigma$ $\gamma\acute{a}\nu\mu\acute{\iota}\tau\alpha\iota$ —

μῆδεα). But sometimes Xenophon indulges in a genuinely Aristophanic pun: in a *παιδικὸς λόγος* (*Cyr.* i. 4. 27) the enamored Mede measures διὰ χρόνον by the wink of an eyelash, much to the amusement of Cyrus; *Cyr.* viii. 4. 22 f., *ψυχρός*, “cold” and “frigid,” i.e., “witless.” Perhaps the best and the worst examples of Xenophon’s puns are to be found in the *Symposium*: vi. 5, Socrates has been bantering Hermogenes because he refuses to take part in the conversation, and the latter replies that he has no chance to say a word, for the others talk all the time except when the flute plays. It is therefore suggested humorously that, like the actor Nicostratus, they converse to the accompaniment of the flute. Thereupon Callias queries what music is appropriate when Antisthenes is besting an opponent in argument, and Antisthenes retorts: “For my opponent, I am sure, the proper thing would be *συριγμός*” (“piping” and “hissing”). This is both clever repartee and good punning. But the pun which follows almost immediately (vi. 7, ἀνωφελεστάτων . . . ἀνωθεν—ωφελοῦσιν), which is spoiled by Madvig’s ingenious but unnecessary emendation, is so bad that it not only defies translation by any except the most confirmed punster—which the writer is not—but also constrains Socrates to apologize for his *ψυχρότης*.

Much of Xenophon’s humor is, quite naturally, the humor of the camp. For example, the expression *ἀμούς καταφαγεῖν*, “devour raw,” which is said by Liddell and Scott to be a proverbial expression for savage cruelty, as it doubtless is in Homer, seems to be, as Xenophon uses it (*Anab.* iv. 8. 14; cf. *Hell.* iii. 3. 6), merely soldiers’ slang, “gobble ‘em up alive.” Likewise another expression of which our author is so fond that he uses it three times (*Anab.* iii. 4. 15; *Cyr.* viii. 3. 27; *Hell.* ii. 4. 16), “The enemy were so thick that you could not miss them if you tried,” looks like a soldier’s commonplace. Still another bit of soldier wit which produced a laugh is the remark to Hystaspes in the battle with Croesus (*Cyr.* vii. 1. 19): “Now, Hystaspes, we want quick work (*ταχνεργία*), for if we kill the enemy before they kill us, not one of us will lose his life.”

Xenophon repeatedly makes clear the value of a jest when soldiers are discouraged. It will be remembered that when the

Spartans asked Seuthes what kind of a man Xenophon was (*Anab.* vii. 6. 4), the latter replied: *τὰ μὲν ἄλλα οὐ κακός*, "a pretty good fellow in most respects", *φιλοστρατιώτης δέ*, "but"—as we may render both in that connection and in this paper—"inclined to *humor* his soldiers." The best example of this kind of "humoring," as well as one of the best pictures which the author gives us of himself, is in his first address to the soldiers (*Anab.* iii. 2. 7-32), a passage which I am sorry to see Professor Bristol recommend for omission with beginners, in which he humorously enumerates the disadvantages of cavalry. It is likewise when the Greeks are discouraged that pleasantries pass between Chirisophus and Xenophon about the thieving propensities of Athenians and Spartans (*Anab.* iv. 6. 14 f.), and about the burning of the villages on the banks of the Tigris (iii. 5. 5 f.). Here belongs also the well-known joke of Clearachus about the donkey (ii. 2. 20), by which the panic of the Greeks was checked (cf. also iv. 6. 12 and v. 8. 11).

Akin to this use of humor is the humor of fact or situation: the mock charge of the Greeks at the review held in honor of the Cilician queen (*Anab.* i. 2. 17 f.), which not only made the Greeks laugh, but also caused them to despise the Persian soldiers whom they were later to meet in battle; the sham battle between men armed with cuirasses and shields only, and men provided with reeds and clods of earth (*Cyr.* ii. 3. 17-20), which caused much laughter and put the soldiers in good humor as well as gave them good exercise, and became so popular that all the soldiers took to it, so that when they were not drilling the whole army would be playing this game; the amusing horse-races under difficulties at Trapezus (*Anab.* iv. 8. 28), and the awkward first attempts of the Persians at horsemanship (*Cyr.* iv. 5. 54).

Above all, Xenophon likes to represent his characters at table, *desipientes in loco*. A sense of humor and good digestion often go together, and apparently he was blessed with both. As in the writings of Aristophanes and Dickens, food and drink play a considerable part in both the *Anabasis* and the *Cyropaedia*. Think of the number of things to eat and drink which are mentioned in the first four books of the *Anabasis*, and notice that in pointing out the qualities of Cyrus as a friend (*Anab.* i. 9. 25 f.) the author

mentions the food and the wine which he used to send to his friends. If we bear this in mind, and also note the amount of space devoted to breakfast, dinner, and supper in the *Anabasis* and the *Cyropaedia*, and to the humorous conversations which are held at dinners of a more or less formal character (*Anab.* vii. 3. 21-33; *Cyr.* i. 3. 4-12; ii. 2. 1-31; v. 2. 14-22; viii. 4. 1-27), we need not assume, as many modern scholars do, that Xenophon's account of the symposium at the home of Callias was an attempt to rival Plato. A sufficient explanation is his fondness for the banquet and for the light conversation which accompanied it.

The wit and humor at table in Xenophon have a strong tendency to be didactic; in other respects they remind us occasionally of the Old Comedy. The personal element is prominent, and the themes are sometimes much the same; at other times they resemble many of those of the modern vaudeville stage. The pun has been mentioned. There is also the old trick of fooling the other fellow by leading him to answer a series of questions all in the same way, and then suddenly asking a question that requires an answer of a different kind (*Symp.* iv. 59).

Many of the stock characters of the humorist appear in the pages of Xenophon, chiefly at the dinners which he describes. Amorous propensities are frequently made the subject of mirth (*Anab.* vii. 4. 10; *Cyr.* i. 4. 27 f.; iv. 5. 51; cf. vi. 1. 34; viii. 4. 19 f.). The greedy man whose avidity overreaches itself contributes to the amusement of the officers whom Cyrus invites to share his own mess (*Cyr.* ii. 2. 2-5; Hystaspes tells the story):

A day or two ago Cyaraxes sent to all the messes the carcasses of the cattle which he had sacrificed, and we had enough meat for three servings at least. The first time around the cook began with me. So when he came in to pass the meat a second time I told him to begin at the other end and serve it in the opposite direction. Whereupon a soldier whose place was about the middle of the line, said: "See here! There's no fairness in this. No one ever begins with us." This annoyed me; I did not want them to feel that they were getting less than their share. So I at once invited the fellow to sit near me, and you may believe that he obeyed this command with soldier-like promptness. When the meat reached us, because we were the last, I suppose, only the smallest pieces were left. Of course the fellow was crestfallen, and he showed his disappointment by remarking *sotto voce*: "Just my luck! Why wasn't I invited to take this place the time before?" But I said: "Never

mind; presently he shall begin with us, and you will have the first chance to take the biggest piece." I had no more than said this when the third and last serving began. The fellow helped himself, and decided that he had taken too small a piece; so he put it back, intending to take another. But the cook thought that he did not care for any more meat, and passed on before he could help himself a second time. Imagine the man's chagrin: he had eaten up all the meat which he had taken, and his last chance of dipping into the dish was ruined, largely by his own stupidity and his pettish dissatisfaction with his luck. The captain who sat nearest us, catching sight of the expression on the fellow's face, clapped his hands and laughed to his heart's content, and as for myself, I couldn't keep from laughing either, but I pretended to cough.

The glutton appears as a humorous character at the banquet of Seuthes (*Anab.* vii. 3. 22-25). The prince, according to the Thracian custom, took the bread and meat which were placed before him and, breaking it into small pieces, tossed it to anyone whom he chose, reserving only a taste for himself. The other guests followed the example of their host. But an Arcadian named Arystas, "a terrible eater" (*φαγεῖν δεινός*), would have none of this; instead, he seized a three-pound loaf and some meat, which he placed in his lap, and fell to. Soon the wine was passed, but Arystas, as a lackey approached with a drinking-horn, noticing that Xenophon had already finished his dinner, said to the servant: "Take it to Xenophon; he isn't busy, but I am, and shall be for some time." "At this," concludes Xenophon, "there was a roar of laughter."

The dull person who obeys orders with a startling literalness, like 'Paminondas of the children's story or the landlubber Dionysus in Charon's boat (*Ar. Frogs* 197 ff.), is described by a Persian *taxiarch* for the entertainment of the mess somewhat as follows (*Cyr.* ii. 2. 6-10):

I was drilling a company of soldiers and had placed their captain first, with a young man next to him and the rest where I thought proper, and standing some distance in front of them, my eyes being on the company, I gave the command, Forward! My fine young gentleman steps in front of his captain and advances. When I saw this I called out to him, "Here! where are you going?" "Forward, sir, as you commanded." "I did not command you alone, but the whole company, to advance." Facing about, he said to his comrades: "Don't you hear him rating us? He ordered the whole company to advance." And all the soldiers stepped past their captain and came toward me. And when the captain ordered them back, they grumbled and said: "We

should like to know which of the two to obey; one commands us to go forward and the other will not let us." I took the matter calmly, began all over again, and told them that no one in the rear ranks was to move until the man in front of him started, and that the only thing for each soldier to bear in mind was to follow the man in front of him. Just then a man who was returning to Persia came to me and told me to give him the letter which I had written home. As the captain knew where the letter was I bade him run and get it. He started off on the run, and that young man followed his captain, cuirass, sword, and all. Seeing him start, all the rest of the company joined in the race, and returned with the letter.

"Of course," adds Xenophon, "everybody laughed at the letter's bodyguard" (*δορυφορία*).

These three examples are perhaps sufficient, but we have by no means exhausted Xenophon's stock of characters who are made to furnish a laugh. The silent guest (*Symp.* vi. 1-5) has already been mentioned; there is also the long-faced individual who is forced to smile against his will (*Cyr.* ii. 2. 11-16); the ill-favored man for whose uncomeliness some compensation is found (*Cyr.* ii. 2. 28-31; viii. 4. 19-23); cf. Socrates' famous defense of the beauty of his own features in *Symp.* v., and, finally, the lazy man (*Cyr.* ii. 2. 22) and the money-lover (*Symp.* iv. 45).

Of wit pure and simple there is so much in the writings of Xenophon, especially in the *Anabasis*, *Cyropaedia*, and *Symposium*, that to discuss it would carry us beyond the limits of this paper. It may be remarked, however, that on the whole it seems to us rather frigid. Perhaps it pleased that wider circle of readers for whom Xenophon wrote. Two examples will suffice: *Cyr.* iii. 1. 35, Cyrus asks the Armenian how much he would give for his wife. "All that I possess." "And how much for your children?" "All that I possess." "Why, in that case you would be giving for your your family twice what you possess." *Cyr.* ii. 3. 22-24, a captain of a company, hearing that another company had been rewarded by a dinner for practicing military evolutions on the way to the mess-tent, tells Cyrus that his company drilled both going to dinner and coming away. "In that case," replied Cyrus, "I will give you a double dinner." "Well, you must give us double stomachs, too."

Xenophon's wit has a practical value, however, whatever it may lack in art. As may be seen in the *Anabasis*, it is ever ready, not

only to cheer the Greeks in times of despondency, but also to extricate Xenophon himself more than once from an awkward situation. For example, at Cottyra (*Anab.* v. 8. 3) a soldier had accused him of brutality during the snows of Armenia. "Well," said Xenophon in his defense, "if it was during the blizzard, when the food was gone and there was not so much as a smell of wine, and men were dropping out of the ranks from exhaustion, and the enemy were at our heels, I grant you that I was more 'brutal' than a donkey which, as the saying goes, is too much of a brute even to feel fatigue." His wit saved him there, and it helped him out of a predicament at the banquet given by Seuthes (*Anab.* vii. 3. 28 ff.). Xenophon had been told that a large gift to his host was expected of him. This was out of the question, for he had nothing left, so when the proper time came he arose from his seat of honor beside the prince, and presented him with the services of himself and his soldiers!

The wit of Xenophon is always genial. His humor is never ill-humor.¹ He himself has given us his theory of the ethics of jesting in the observation of Gobryas (*Cyr.* v. 2. 18; cf. viii. 1. 33) that the jests of the Persians at the court of Cyrus were always pleasant, free from ribaldry and malice and everything that was liable to arouse anger. This well describes the jests of Xenophon. They came from his own nature, and that was always good nature. His sense of humor, added to his even temper, contributed largely to his success in bringing the Ten Thousand safely out of the heart of Persia, and the Attic salt with which he seasons his account of that successful march has helped the writer in the attempt—which is also attended with difficulties and discouragements—to make beginners (alas! not ten thousand in number) understand and enjoy his masterpiece.

¹ Except in *Symp.* vi. 10, and this is excused as bibulous quarrelsomeness (*παροιμία*).